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ABSTRACT

The decisions President Richard Nixon and his closest advisors made in the Watergate coverup were products of what Irving Janis calls "groupthink." Groupthink, a type of decision-making emphasizing unanimity over objective evaluation, develops when the decision makers (1) form a group of marked cohesiveness, (2) insulate themselves from outside groups and potential criticism, (3) lack an impartial leadership, (4) establish no norms for evaluating information, (5) share similar social and ideological backgrounds, and (6) experience situational stress from both within and without the group. An examination of participants' reports and White House transcripts suggests that Nixon, H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, John Dean, and John Mitchell formed just such a group, obsessively loyal to the President and isolated from outside opinions. Symptomatic of their use of groupthink, the President and his advisors shared illusions of invulnerability. Believing in the inherent morality of their efforts, they stereotyped critical out-groups as harmful. To preserve a sense of unanimity, members censored themselves and pressured others to concur with the group's policies. Further research on the decision-making process in the Watergate coverup could yield steps for identifying or avoiding the groupthink phenomenon. (MM)

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Small Group Dynamics and the Watergate Coverup:

A Case Study of Groupthink

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Small Group Dynamics and the Watergate Coverup:

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At 2:30 a.m., June 17, 1972, Washington, D.C. police apprehended five men who had broken in to the Democratic National Headquarters, housed in the Watergate Hotel. The men were interrupted in the midst of their efforts to correct a faulty wiretap placed there on May 28th. The arrest was ironic; it followed three previous break-in attempts. On May 26th, their attempt failed due to their inability to open a door to the staircase that lead to the D.N.C. offices. During their second attempted break-in, on May 27th, they were unable to successfully pick the lock on the door of the offices. The third attempt succeeded in the placement of the faulty wiretap. Only on their fourth break-in attempt were they apprehended (The White House Transcripts, 1973). To those who understood it at the time, the irony should have served as fair warning of worse things to come. The capture of the men charged only with second-degree burglary set off a chain of events, including a massive coverup of knowledge and involvement by the President of the United States and his closest advisors, that shook the country to its core and ultimately lead to the unprecedented resignation of the highest elected official in the land. In the end, the President was forced out of office for his early knowledge of the White House staff's involvement and his unabated efforts to coverup that involvement.

In a case of irony added to irony, it was the President's own taping system that lead to his undoing. Installed in the White House to capture day-to-day decision-making and historic deeds and significant comments for Richard Nixon's memoirs, the taping system yielded the now-famous 18 minute gap and the June 23, 1972 "smoking pistol" that hurled Nixon out of office. The products of Nixon's efforts to capture a place in posterity also permit intimate

observation of the discussions in the days immediately after the Watergate break-in as well as more than two years of coverup efforts. In addition, nearly every participant in the coverup process has recorded his version in the many volumes written about Watergate. The transcripts of those conversations, and the written reports permit careful investigation of the communication processes that yielded the historic and unprecedented outcomes. Those discussion processes are the focus of the present case study. This paper is an attempt to explore the Watergate coverup as a possible instance of groupthink among Richard Nixon and his closest advisors. Janis' established theoretical framework provides guidance for understanding flawed decision making processes by identifying conditions conducive to and symptoms of the groupthink phenomenon. Here that guidance is applied to the conversations and reports of the Watergate coverup.

Groupthink Theory as an Analytic Framework

In Groupthink, Irving L. Janis (1972) outlined a theory for understanding decision-making fiascoes. In observing that "groups can bring out the worst as well as the best" (p. 3) in human decision making, Janis set out to apply and understand concepts of group dynamics in recent historic policy decisions. He defined "groupthink" as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p. 9). Janis discussed the "surprise" attack on Pearl Harbor, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, and the escalation of the war in Viet Nam as examples of policy fiascoes sharing the characteristics of groupthink. (More recently, in a newer edition, published after the present program of research was begun, Janis (1982) also considered the Watergate coverup as a case of groupthink.) Janis' theory details the circumstances under which groupthink is most likely to occur as well as eight symptoms of groupthink. In an attempt to

apply the theory to the Watergate coverup, I will discuss the circumstances of the Nixon White House which made decision-making vulnerable to groupthink; then I will report evidence of groupthink symptoms. Finally, I will discuss research strategies for refining and further researching the case for the Watergate coverup as an instance of groupthink.

Conditions Conducive to Groupthink

In his initial theorizing, Janis (1972) cited high levels of group cohesiveness as detrimental to group decision-making. He noted that as a group develops high levels of cohesiveness, it increases its power to bring about conformity to group norms and results in group members being more inclined to reject a nonconformist. Further, "just as the members insulate themselves from outside critics who threaten to disrupt the unity and espirit de corps of their group, they take steps, often without being aware of it, to counteract the disruptive influence of inside critics who are attacking the group's norms" (p. 5). Janis added that two other detrimental tendencies emerge from conditions not fully understood: the tendency to negatively stereotype out-groups and the tendency to engage in a risky-shift (the phenomen occurring when a group tends to make riskier decisions than the average group member would make) (p. 6). In summary, Janis' (1972) original postulate was that "the more amiability and espirit de corps among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions against out-groups" (p. 13).

Janis refined his theory and developed a model to further explain groupthink (Janis, 1982; Janis & Mann, 1977). The model identifies specific antecedent conditions which result in concurrence seeking. Concurrence seeking gives rise to symptoms of groupthink which result in defective decision making, and finally, in a low probability for a successful group outcome.

The antecedent conditions, or conditions conducive to groupthink, include the existence of a cohesive group, four structural faults of the organization, and two provocative contextual factors (p. 244):

A. Decision-Makers Constitute a Cohesive Group:

Group cohesiveness is the attraction experienced by group members for the group. While sometimes conceptualized as the degree of mutual liking among group members, group cohesiveness consists, more generally, of the degree to which group members value their membership in a group and want to continue to be affiliated with the group (Janis, 1982, p. 245). Cohesiveness results in a desire for concurrence and for continued group unity.

B-1. Structural Faults of the Organization:

The first three structural faults of the organization represent the "absence of a sense of organizational constraint" (p. 249) while the fourth precludes "constructive multiple advocacy" (p. 250).

1. Insulation of the group:

The group insulates itself from information and the advisement of qualified associates in the organization who are viewed as "outsiders" (Janis, 1982, p. 249).

2. Lack of a tradition of impartial leadership:

Rather than encouraging open and unbiased inquiry into available alternatives, the leader identifies his or her preferences and pushes the group in that direction (p. 249).

3. Lack of norms requiring methodical procedures:

The organization has no history of, nor current set of, norms requiring specified procedures for information

search and evaluation (p. 249).

4. Homogeneity of members' social background and ideology:
   The lack of heterogeneity in group members' backgrounds assists in the creation of an easy concurrence. Group members are more likely to share basic values, and further, find it easy to identify with each other's reasoning, resulting in a tendency to focus on and gravitate toward one alternative (p. 250).

B-2. Provocative Situational Context

Group members experience stress from both internal and external sources.

1. High stress from external threats with low hope of a better solution than the leader's:
   This condition occurs when a group anticipates losses regardless of the alternative chosen, and because of the difficulty of their dilemma, have little hope of finding a better solution. As a result of high stress from external sources, the group is more likely to rely on itself for support.
2. Low self-esteem temporarily induced by:
   a. Recent failures that make members' inadequacies salient (prior ineffective decision-making),
   b. Excessive difficulties on current decision-making tasks that lower each member's sense of self-efficacy (faced with a dilemma that members may perceive as beyond their competence),
   c. Moral dilemmas: Apparent lack of feasible alternatives

except ones that violate ethical standards (members experience a conflict between pragmatic alternatives and their own moral values).

According to the model, these organizational and situational conditions increase the probability that the group will engage, excessively, in concurrence seeking. That concurrence seeking may result in groupthink and lead to ineffective decision-making.

Symptoms

The occurrence of groupthink, while in process, is known through eight symptoms.

1. The illusion of invulnerability:

   Groups engaging in groupthink are likely to consider high-risk actions; the group's belief that they are invulnerable, or are exempt from danger is symptomatic of groupthink. The illusion builds confidence and encourages risk-taking (Janis, 1982, p. 256).

2. Belief in the inherent morality of the group:

   The group assumes that its actions are based on only the highest of principles, and thus, any result of group concurrence is moral. The belief functions to relieve individuals' guilt or concern over group violation of personal ethical standards (Janis, 1982, p. 257).

3. Collective rationalizations:

   The group discounts warnings. Shared rationalization alleviates fear and the sense of personal inadequacy.

4. Stereotypes of out-groups:

   The group creates negative and dehumanizing images of competitive

out-groups. Such negative stereotypes reinforce, by contrast, the inherent goodness of the present group and alleviate fears of defeat by those out-groups.

5. Self-censorship:

Individual group members suppress personal doubts they may have about the group's decisions. Self-censorship is likely to occur when the member depends on group membership and other group members for maintaining self-esteem (p. 257). Self-censorship adds to the sense of collective as well as individual strength.

6. Illusion of unanimity:

The group's senses, falsely, that consensus exists among all members about decisions being made; group convergence is emphasized. Preserving a sense of unanimity reduces anxiety and guilt and may create a sense of omnipotence (Janis, 1982, p. 258).

7. Direct pressure on dissenters:

Dissension takes the form of questioning the group's decisions, or perhaps the group's invulnerability or morality. When engaging in groupthink, the group is likely to refute the questioning and/or question the dissenting member's loyalty (Janis, 1972). The pressure against dissension maintains the harmony and pseudo-consensus of the group

8. Self-appointed mindguards:

Mind-guards protect the leader and other group members from "unwelcome ideas that might set them to thinking about unfavorable consequences of their preferred course of action and that might lead to dissension instead of a comfortable consensus" (Janis, 1972, p. 41). In effect, the mindguard screens information from

the group which might undermine individual and collective confidence; the screening functions to minimize the possibility that the group will re-evaluate its earlier decision negatively.

Janis assumes that the frequency and pronouncement of the symptoms in a group are direct predictors of the quality level of the group's decision: "The more frequently a group displays the symptoms, the worse will be the quality of its decisions. Even when some symptoms are absent, the others may be so pronounced that we can predict all the unfortunate consequences of groupthink" (Janis, 1972, p. 198).

The Watergate Coverup: A Case of Groupthink?

Scholars, journalists, and political analysts have devoted a multitude of volumes, a wealth of columns and articles, and endless hours of newscasts and analyses to describing the events of Watergate, interpretations of the motives of participants, and attributions regarding even the personalities of key figures. With rare exception, the Watergate coverup has been treated as a political fiasco, fueled by sometimes hidden agendas and overt political ambition. Unlike previous analyses, the current case study assumes that the nature of the group discussion processes underlying the coverup decision-making, rather than the content of those discussions (or characteristics of the participants), holds the key to understanding how a President and his chief advisors created their own doom. Groupthink theory provides a clear framework for assessing the Watergate coverup as a result of ineffective small group problem-solving rather than political mishap or outright stupidity. Available evidence supports the presence of groupthink antecedent conditions in the Nixon White House and the emergence of groupthink symptoms in decision-making interactions.

Antecedent Conditions to Groupthink in the Watergate Coverup

The presence of conditions likely to foster groupthink are described,

albeit coincidentally, in participants' accounts of the Watergate coverup and in scholarship about Nixon's style.

Group cohesiveness. Who constituted the coverup decision-making group? As documented in the White House transcripts, and for the purposes of the present analysis, the following are assumed to constitute the small group: Richard Nixon; H. R. Haldeman, chief of staff; John Ehrlichman, domestic affairs advisor; John Dean, counsel to the President; and John N. Mitchell, Attorney General, and later the 1972 campaign director. Group cohesiveness is the most critical antecedent condition. If one takes mutual liking and personal attraction as the best indices of group cohesiveness, then it is difficult to sustain the argument of cohesiveness in the coverup group. Raven's (1974) sociometric analysis concluded that "a close examination of the Nixon group does not indicate the high level of espirit de corps, mutual attraction toward one another, mutual admiration, and identification which Janis considered important for the occurrence of groupthink" (p. 310). Instead, Raven describes the group as full of contention and distrust. Dean (1976) notes, in particular, a high level of animosity between Ehrlichman and Mitchell.

If instead, one assumes that the overriding factor in group cohesiveness consists of members' valuing of their membership in the group and desire to remain affiliated with the group, and, more particularly in this case, with the President, then the Nixon group was clearly highly cohesive. Indeed, Janis (1982, p. 247) specifically indicates that group cohesiveness thrives on prestige. The prestige of being "one of the President's men" bound the group together; more important than being a member of the group, per se, was being identified as close to the President. John Dean's (1976) account of his response to the August 29, 1972, Nixon televised press conference reference to a non-existent "Dean investigation" reflects the value of being a member of

that elite group:

> The fact that I had never heard of a Dean investigation," much less conducted one, did not seem important then. I was basking in the glory of being publicly perceived as the man the President had turned to with a nasty problem like Watergate. The President's move suited me fine. (p. 125)

Further evidence of high group cohesiveness is found in Dean's account of the informal demeanor within the group in contrast to the formality surrounding official Oval Office events; Dean's description is of the September 15, 1972 "stroking session" in which the President congratulated him on his handling of Watergate:

> I was not prepared for what I found. Haldeman was slumped in a chair in front of the President's desk, his yellow pad dangling from his hand rather than poised as usual for note taking. The President was reclining in his swivel chair at what seemed a precarious angle, his feet propped up on his desk to leave the Presidential heel marks. From his nearly supine position, the President looked at me through the V his shoes formed. I paused at the door, feeling like an intruder, and waited for Haldeman and the President to snap back into form. But they didn't, and I walked hesitantly to a chair. I wouldn't have been much more surprised by the atmosphere if the two of them had been wearing dresses. I was flattered to be so collegially received. (pp. 130-131)

When, on the morning after the 1972 landslide election, the President directed that all appointed government officials submit letters of resignation, Dean reports that, "I was unaffected, secure on the inside" (p. 145). Likewise, Haldeman (1978) measured the prestige of his job in terms of his

nearness and access to the President:

> I saw few people during a regular working day other than the staff and the President. I was very definitely an "inside man." And I was frequently the President's sounding board for whatever was on his mind. (p. 52)

Dean's valuing of group membership clearly carried him through hard times. On February 27 1973, he began regular meetings with the President. He reports his valuing of group membership, and identifies those who shared that prestige:

> Although I still went home to Scotch each night, my new status with the President temporarily revived my confidence that I could endure as the ringmaster of the coverup. I could go no higher: I had become the junior member of the select group that met almost daily with the President. Occasionally he would tell Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Ziegler, or Kissinger to wait while he finished a meeting with me. I would pass them going in and out of the Oval Office, and we would exchange brotherly glances in tribute to our membership in the most select fraternity we could imagine. (p. 183)

Thus, the cohesiveness of the Nixon group was not one of personal admiration; instead "all of them wanted with all their hearts and souls to be in that group and to be central to that group. They were all bound to the group through loyalty, acceptance, and identification with their leader, Richard M. Nixon" (Raven, p. 310).

Structural faults in the organization. Insulation of the group from outside groups, as well as from other relevant groups within the organization, is a condition which fosters groupthink. Many reports describe Nixon's paranoia about group loyalty. Severe concern for maintaining eminently loyal advisors around him prevented the infiltration of often-needed relevant

information and conflicting opinions. When John Dean (1976) was interviewed for the position of President's counsel he encountered that same insulating paranoia when asked "a most curious question" by Haldeman:

> "Do you believe that you can be loyal to Richard Nixon and work for the White House rather than for John Mitchell?"
>
> "I'm sure I can, yes," I answered. But I was thinking, how strange, Mitchell has a close relationship with the President. (p. 7)

Nixon's method of organizing the administration functioned to insulate him from conflicting and dissident opinion. In The Making of the President, Theodore White (1973) describes plans for a "big team" and a "young team." The big team would consist of big name politicians carrying the power of the party "names like Governors Romney, Rockefeller, Scranton--would run the cabinet" (p. 270). But, for the most part, "the big men would not join him" (p. 270). Those who did "were seen as outsiders by the Nixon group, barred from the Oval Office" (Raven, 1974, p. 306). Clearly, the "young team," who met the requirements of absolute personal loyalty, controlled access and insulated the President: "Three years later, by early 1972, this requirement of personal loyalty had isolated the President--not only from his Cabinet but from much else: from Congress, from the press and television news system, from his own Republican Party" (White, 1973, p. 271).

As well as Nixon insulating himself through careful selection of exceedingly loyal advisors, Nixon's group insulated him, partly as protection from his own erratic and vengeful decisions. Dean discovered that insulation early. On his first day at the White House he received a "confidential memorandum" about a magazine's report linking Vice-President Agnew with a plan to cancel the 1972 election and to repeal the Bill of Rights. Dean's instructions were clear: "It was noted that this is a vicious attack and

possibly a suit should be filed or a federal investigation ordered to follow up on it" (p. 23). The "noter" was the President: "No one had to explain why the President's name was not used. He was always to be kept one step removed, insulated, to preserve his 'deniability'" (p. 23).

Haldeman (1978) describes his gatekeeping role, which insulated the President from unnecessary and time-consuming appointments. But he also acknowledges the type of insulation that Dean had encountered:

> The other reason for the wall was my secret. I soon realized that <u>this</u> President had to be protected from himself. Time and again I would receive petty vindictive orders. "Hugh Sidey is to be kept off Air Force One." (Sidey was <u>Time's</u> man.) Or even, once or twice, "<u>All</u> the press is barred from Air Force One." (Pool representatives of the press accompanied the President on every trip.) Or, after a Senator made an anti-Vietnam War speech: "Put a 24-hour surveillance on that bastard." If I took no action, I would pay for it. The President never let up. He'd be on the intercom buzzing me ten minutes after such an order. "What have you done about Sidey?" I'd say, "I'm working on it," and delay and delay until Nixon would one day comment, with a sort of half-smile on his face, "I guess you never took action on that, did you?" "No." "Well, I guess it was the best thing." (pp. 58-59)

While the insulation protected the President from those who would consume his time, batter his image, or take his orders literally, that insulation also separated the President from much needed information. Mollenhoff (1974) reports that, prior to taking office, Nixon apparently understood the need for a White House ombudsman to alert the President to "budding scandals involving his subordinates" (p. 7) In a 1968 pre-election conversation, Nixon spoke with

Mollenhoff of the "corrupting influence of secrecy in government" (p. 7). At that time Nixon seemed to recognize the need for the President to have "an independent, nonpartisan analysis of the facts and law on potential scandals, so he would not be a captive of the bureaucratic chain" (p. 7). In July, 1969, Mollenhoff took the job of White House ombudsman, understanding that his effectiveness necessitated ready access to Nixon. In a meeting with the President shortly after taking the job, Nixon agreed to see Mollenhoff at any time. Mollenhoff experienced more than two months of broken appointments, and then, in October was refused access by Haldeman. Even when Mollenhoff managed to see the President, Haldeman was always present, insisting on a strict agenda. A few months later, Mollenhoff left the job. Mollenhoff (1977) reports that the organizational chart at the White House precluded access the the President except through Haldeman and Ehrlichman; the insulation created what many government officials called "the Berlin Wall."

Nixon's insistence on absolute loyalty, and his open attempts to use Presidential power to punish those who disagreed with his policies, made the lack of a tradition of impartial leadership obvious to those privy to Oval Office conversations. Nixon created a polarity between himself and all but the most loyal and agreeing of staff members and legislators; he was constantly engaged in combat. He articulated his battles against the "enemy" openly. Nixon's campaign "theme was always attack, attack, and attack again" (Haldeman, 1978, p. 50). James Barber observed that "Nixon lives in a fighting world; his writing and speaking are full of the imagery of combat. He sees himself as forever engaged in battles, hit by 'terrible attacks,' in virtual hand-to-hand combat" (Barber, 1972, p.).

Porter's (1976) fantasy theme analysis of the White House transcripts further supports the lack of impartial leadership. In discussing Nixon's battles with the press, Porter notes that "On the other hand, when they agreed

with the press, they used this as evidence that their group was right. The Nixon group members were interested in facts and opinions which supported their initially preferred policy" (p. 274).

The clearest and most methodical procedures for decision making in the Nixon White House were (1) to follow the initially preferred position, and to seek only support for that position (Porter, 1976), (2) to trust only decisions made by the most loyal of followers, and (3) to be tough. While Haldeman insisted on the establishment and following of a clear and limited agenda for others' meetings with the President, the meetings among Nixon and his closest advisors apparently followed no such norms. The lack of norms requiring methodical procedures is apparent in a review of many of the White House transcripts. Discussions lack direction, ramble endlessly, and fail to sustain substantive focus. Gouran (1976) observes that:

> of all of the transcripts, the one detailing the conversations between the President and Haldeman on June 23 reveals most clearly the absence of concentration on issues of substance. Having just agreed to have CIA interference with the FBI's investigation of the Watergate break-in, they turned their attention to an incredible assortment of irrelevancies, including politics, the devaluation of the lira, the Miami convention, Pat and the girls' hairdo problems when descending from a helicopter, and, of course, Six Crises. (p. 179)

Similarly, White (1975) characterizes the White House conversations of April 14th to 17th, 1973 in which Nixon finally began to realize the culpability of his staff for the coverup: "The transcripts. . . make no sense if one seeks the working of sequential minds. They can be read only as a record of agony. . ." (p. 271).

Homogeneity of members' social background and ideology constitutes a

condition conducive to groupthink. The Nixon group met this condition:

> Much has been written of the similarities among many of the people brought into the Nixon Adminstration. Characterizations, such as "All the King's Krauts" and "the Berlin Wall," have been used to suggest their ideological solidarity. Moreover, geographic origin, education, social class, dress, religious background, hair length, vocabulary, and even an interest in professional football have surfaced as indices of comparability" (Gouran, 1976, p. 180).

Dean (1976) notes the fine details of similarity in reporting his preparations for his job interview at San Clemente: "I dashed home to pack, carefully slecting suits, shirts, ties, and shoes consonant with my image of the Nixon White House" (p. 3). He judged the situation accurately, shown in his report of his first meeting with Haldeman:

> I watched as he checked me out and saw a reflection of his own taste in clothes. I was wearing black wing-tip shoes; he was wearing brown wing-tips. He had on a white button-down-collar shirt; mine was blue. My suit was as conservative as his. Later I discovered that he and I shopped at the same men's store in Washington. (p. 6)

Haldeman (1978) reports Nixon's desire for homogeneity in choosing cabinet and staff members. According to Haldeman, Nixon was insecure about his background. He hated the Eastern elite, reported to have said, when reorganizing the government for the second term: "None of them in the Cabinet, do you understand? None of those Harvard bastards" (p. 69)!

The final antecedent condition to groupthink is situational stress, from both internal and external sources. Accounts by Nixon's advisors create the clear and consistent image that stress was a constant factor in their

individual jobs and as a group. Nixon's combative, attacking stance created a situation in which external threat was perceived as a constant. The Nixon group was constantly fighting with the press, Congress, or demonstrators. Added to this, 1972 was an election year. While, in the end, Nixon came away with an 89% majority in the contest, the history of the previous election probably created a false sense of threat. (Nixon's winning margin over Humphrey in 1968 was a meager .7% of the electorate.)

Undoubtedly some stress was added by Haldeman's style of managing the Nixon group: "I rode them very hard; made heavy demands on them for flawless work with no mistakes or excuses. I drummed into them the concept that anything can be done if you just figure out how to do it and don't give up. I wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. They knew they were expected to deliver" (Haldeman, 1978, pp. 52-53). The staff was constantly reminded of the 1968 near-failure, and, by Haldeman, of the unacceptability of even the smallest mistake. Haldeman's stand that anything could be done, in the context of the most powerful political in-group in the nation, must have constantly brought the Nixon group face-to-face with moral dimemmas. Their power to act seemed infinite, and perhaps that power resulted in their failure to review alternative ethical measures. Magruder (1974) observed that "No one ever considered that there would not be a cover-up. It seemed inconceivable that with our political power we could not erase the mistake we had made" (p. 269).

Symptoms of Groupthink in the Watergate Coverup

Ample evidence of all eight groupthink symptoms can be found in the White House transcripts and in accounts by Watergate coverup participants. Representative samples are included here.

The illusion of invulnerability. Perhaps more than any other symptom, the illusion of invulnerability pervades Watergate coverup discussions and accounts. The White House transcripts are replete with self-assurances that

the group, and in particular, the President, is immune from danger.

From the beginning, the group formed a pattern of reassuring themselves of their ultimate safety. Dean's (1976) account of a White House meeting just after the break-in at Watergate describes the group as "in fine spirits" (p. 193). They were assured by Kleindienst (the Attorney General) that the problem of leaks about the Watergate break-in, apparently from the Metropolitan Police, would be solved (p. 104). Thus, from the beginning, the group sought assurances of safety and constantly provided those assurances to each other. In one of many ironic assurances, Nixon said of Watergate, "The thing is just one of those side issues and a month later everybody looks back and wonders what all the shooting was about" (The presidential transcripts, 1974, p. 36).

In the September 15th, 1972, meeting between Dean and Nixon, Nixon congratulates Dean; they both are blatently optimistic that Watergate has been handled well and, that by election day, will be behind them:

> Dean: Three months ago I would have had trouble predicting where we'd be today. I think that I can say that fifty-four days from now that, uh, not a thing will come crashing down to our, our surprise.
>
> Nixon: Well, the whole thing is a can of worms, as you know. A lot of this stuff went on. And, uh, and, uh, and the people who worked (unintelligible) awfully embarrassing. And, uh, and, the, uh, but the, but the way you, you've handled it, it seems to me, has been very skillful, because you -- putting your fingers in the dikes every time that leaks have sprung here and there. (Transcript, 4A, p. 11)

Later in the same conversation, Nixon further argues the optimistic view and minimizes both the dangers involved and the implications of the group's actions:

> And you really can't just sit and worry yourself -- about it all the time, thinking "The worst may happen," but it may not. So you just try to button it up as well as you can and hope for the best. And,. . . and remember that basically the damn thing is just one of those unfortunate things, and we're trying to cut our losses. (Transcript, 4A, p. 22)

Dean's (1976) own assessment of danger after that meeting indicates that he had been reassured: "We would make it through the election, I calculated, and then maybe the whole Watergate mess would evaporate in the light of the President's renewed power" (p. 136). The theme of "cutting our losses" continued throughout the coverup and is evident in the March 21, 1973 discussion among Nixon, Dean, and Haldeman (Transcript, 12A, p. 77), when Nixon says of paying blackmail money to Hunt: "That's just one way you could go. . . on the assumption that we're, we, by continuing to cut our losses, we're not going to win" (p. 77). Later on, after assuring themselves that the blackmail money could be arranged, the group deals with the possibility that the blackmailers will "crack;" Nixon dismisses the potential danger: "Eventually, all the people aren's going to care that much" (p. 79). And still later, in problem-solving how to get the blackmail money, Nixon says: "I have a feeling we could handle this one. . . Let me say that I think you could get that in cash, and I know money is hard, but there are ways" (p. 85).

Nixon followed through with more assurances in a meeting the next day between Nixon, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Dean, and Mitchell:

> Well, let me tell you, you've done a hell of a job here. . . I was going to say, uh, uh, John Dean is, uh (unintelligible) got

> -- put the fires out, almost got the damn thing nailed down till past the election and so forth. We all know what it is. Embarrassing God damn thing the way it went, and so forth. But, in my view, uh, some of it will come out; we will survive it. That's the way it is. That's the way you've got to look at it. (Transcript, 16A, pp. 61-62)

For Nixon, the illusion rested on the belief of unlimited Presidential power. Dash (1976), who served as chief counsel to the Senate Watergate committee, argues: "Why didn't he destroy the tapes?. . . Simply because in his arrogant perception of his power, Nixon believed that no one could force him to release the tapes" (p. 197). Further, when faced with a grand jury's subpoena for White House tapes, Nixon told Sirica that "the President was as absolute a monarch as Louis XIV had been -- but for only four years at a time" (Dash, p. 209). Dash interprets Nixon's final willingness to make the edited transcripts available as based in the belief that "the silent majority" would not bother to read them but would accept the word of their President on faith (Dash, p. 255). In sum, "there emerged a President who believed he had absolute, unreviewable power" (Dash, p. 265).

Belief in the inherent morality of the group. Much of the belief in the inherent morality of the Watergate coverup group's actions rested in their belief in the inherent morality of the Presidency. Anything done in the name of the Presidency was assumed moral. Above all else, Richard Nixon was President, and the Presidency, as an office, warranted loyalty and protection. Much of the Watergate coverup proceeded under the assumption that the ultimate ideal was protecting the President.

Dean (1976) reports his own basic instincts to protect the President, then under threat of blackmail by Hunt: "The President. I felt myself rising instinctively in salute. I thought of aircraft carriers, battles, strong men

reverent at the mention of his name, a communications network that flashed each utterance around the world. This was my life's nourishment. I felt tall for having made it so close to the shadow of the Presidency" (p. 193). Dean contemplated that, for the sake of preserving the President, all of the advisors would have to resign and possibly go to jail (p. 194). He turned his mind to the task of how to extricate the President from the situation, the ultimate goal (p. 195). In a March 21, 1973, strategy meeting with Nixon, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Mitchell, Dean suggested opening Watergate up: "what it's doing, Mr. President, is getting you up above and away from it. . . and that's the most important thing" (p. 211). When Haldeman pushed Dean to write a false report, even though Dean sensed that he was being set up, he rationalized his personal loss in terms of the more lofty ideal: "Yet if it would help the President, maybe it was the right thing to do. . . . Everyone except the President was expendable, including me, and I knew exactly what would happen when it all started to crumble in on him" (p. 214).

For Richard Nixon (1978), the morality of the coverup, as well as the break-in itself was justified in history. His reaction to hearing of the break-in characterizes this stance: "My reaction to the Watergate break-in was completely pragmatic, If it was also cynical, it was a cynicism born of experience. I had been in politics too long, and seen everything from dirty tricks to vote fraud. I could not muster much moral outrage over a political bugging" (p. 113). Nixon was shocked at the public response to Watergate: "Goldwater put it in context, he said 'Well, for Christ's sake, everybody bugs eveyone else.' We know that. . . Well, it's true. It happens to be totally true. . . We were bugged in '68 on the plane and bugged in '62, uh, even running for governor" (Transcript, 4A, p. 5).

Further, at least part of Nixon's vengefulness against anyone who disagreed with him rested on the assumption of Presidential morality. The President

determined what was right and good; punishment was warranted for the press, the Democrats, or anyone else who dared to dispute the President. (See, e.g., Dean, pp. 132-134).

Collective rationalizations/discounting warnings. That the Watergate coverup would ultimately split apart at the seams should not have surprised anyone; there were many warnings. But as a group, the participants tended to discount that warnings and to rationalize the workability of their plans.

As early as the week after the break-in, Haldeman outlined a whole series of warnings to Nixon: the FBI was not under their control and had begun to trace the money and an informant had produced films containing pictures of the D.N.C. letter head documents. But Haldeman capped off the warnings with a rationalization, that, in more careful analysis, could have been viewed as a warning itself: "the only network that paid any attention to it last night was NBC...they did a massive story on the Cuban thing" (Transcript, 1A, p. 3). Later in the same conversation, Haldeman warned that "we're relying on more and more people all the time" (p. 5) to sustain the coverup. That concern is dismissed by the simple decision to order the FBI to halt the investigation on national security grounds. And still later, Nixon articulated his own warnings about what might happen if the investigation lead to Hunt: "You will--that will uncover a lot of things. You will open that scab there's a hell of a lot of things and that we just feel that it would be very detrimental to have this thing go any further" (p. 6). But with a simple decision to "play it tough" (p. 8), Nixon and Haldeman discounted that warning as well as concerns over the involvement and interrogations of Colson and Mitchell.

Later, when Hunt began to blackmail the group, Dean (1976) reports that when he sought specific guidance about the obvious problem, he got no help. Instead. "Haldeman and Ehrlichman wanted to make Howard Hunt go away with sheer will power" (p. 154); the problem was tossed back to Mitchell.

Often the simple verbal dismissal of warnings, particularly by the President, was enough to offset the perception of serious and impending danger. For example, in the March 21, 1973, morning meeting between Nixon, Haldeman, and Dean, Dean used the metaphor of the cancer spreading throughout the administration, to communicate, the vulnerability of the group as a whole, and particularly, of the President. Dean finally warned, "but some people are going to have to go to jail" (Transcript, 12 A, p. 55) When questioned by Nixon, Dean pointed to himself, but that possiblility was quickly dismissed by the President: "Oh, no. Uh, let me say I--not because you're here--but just looking at it from a cold legal standpoint: You are a lawyer, you were a counsel--you were doing what you were doing as a counsel, and you were not, uh,. . .doing anything like that" (p. 56). Dean persisted on the obstruction of justice charge, but Nixon argued that "I think that one, I think that, I feel could be cut off at the pass" (p. 56). In a meeting later the same day, which included Ehrlichman, Haldeman forecast jail sentences for Magruder, Chapin, Dean and Haldeman. Without providing any rationale, the President discounted the latter two possibilities: "Uh, again, I question the last two" (Transcript, 13A, p. 20). With that simple dismissal, Haldeman also backed off: "Certainly Chapin. Certainly Strachan. No, not really. . . Chapin and Strachan are clean" (p. 20). With that simple Presidential waving away of a warning, the discussion continued, never to return to the possible jailing of the President's closest advisors.

In his memoirs, Nixon (1978) acknowledges the group's willingness to rationalize their political motives for calling off the FBI: "We ourselves rationalized the implications. . . we confusedly reconstructed events around our recollection of our motive -- we remembered what we wanted to remember" (p. 412).

Stereotypes of out-groups. For the Watergate coverup group, the

out-groups consisted of the press, the Democrats, the Justice Department, and other investigative bodies (e.g., the Senate Watergate Committee).

The press, in particular the Washington Post, was a continual source of aggravation for the coverup group. Just as the group thought the coverup fire was under control, the press would discover and report more fuel. Obviously, the group thought that Watergate received an undue and unfair amount of coverage; Dean argued: "The amount of coverage this case is getting. They may never get a fair trial. . .And the Post, as you know, has got a, a, a large team that they've assigned to do nothing but this. . ." (Transcript, 4A, p. 24).

Nixon (1978) accused the press of writing fiction about Watergate (p. 212), conducting a vigilante squad (p. 389), being obsessed with Watergate (p. 398), and finally of "outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting" (p. 502). Eventually, Nixon (1978) cast blame on the unprofessionalism of the press as the cause of his possible impeachment:

> Finally, there were the media. I felt that, consciously or subconsciously, they had a vested interest in my impeachment. After all the months of leaks and accusations and innuendo, the media stood to lose if I were vindicated. (p. 631)

One of Nixon's rhetorical strategies was to rationalize his actions as a reflection of the wrongdoing of his enemies. For example, in justifying the wiretapping of the Democrats and other enemies, Nixon argued that "They're doing it do us" (Dean, 1976, p. 115). As Dean put it, "he was fighting back against ruthless opponents" (p. 115). In one of his vindictive spells during the September 15th, 1972, meeting, Nixon characterized Larry O'Brien (chair of the D.N.C) and his lawyer, (Edward Bennett Williams), as "bastards" (Dean, 1976, p. 134). As usual, Nixon was quick to point out the transgressions of the enemies, saying that Williams had "done some rather unethical things" (p.

134). In that same conversation, Nixon referred to the Democratic Senators who were running for office as "crooks" (Transcript, 4A, p. 16). In fact, Dean reports that Nixon's desire to launch a counterscandal against the Democrats was one of the primary themes of his meetings with Nixon until mid-March of 1973 (p. 184). Even in his memoirs, Nixon (1978) attributes his apprehension over a possible impeachment vote in the House in July of 1974 as based, not on his possible guilt, but rather on the faults of the opposition who were unable maintain professional objectivity:

> I tried to pinpoint the reasons for my apprehension. . .Another reason was was my knowledge of how forceful, organized, and powerful the Democratic congressional leadership was, and how desperate they would become if it looked as though impeachment was actually going to be voted down. Having brought things this far, they would rightly fear the risk of a backlash if the impeachment drive failed and voters began to feel that the agony of Watergate had been prolonged for partisan motives. (p. 629)

In the March 21, 1973 morning meeting, Dean characterized Judge Sirica (who tried the Watergate defendants) as "a peculiar animal" (Transcript, 12A, p. 64). Later, in discussing how Sirica might deal with sentencing, Dean remarked that: "He can be a, just a son-of-a-bitch, uh, as far as the whole thing" (p. 80).

Curiously, as the details of Watergate emerged, Liddy and the other direct participants in the break-in quickly became a stereotyped out-group. The rhetorical strategy of defining as an out-group the very group they had hired, indirectly, to do the dirty work, functioned to separate themselves from the scandal and to reflect positively on themselves by contrast. During the June 23, 1972 meeting with Haldeman, Nixon quipped: "This involves these Cubans,

Hunt, and a lot of hanky-panky that we have nothing to do with ourselves" (Transcript,1A, p. 6). Nixon asked about Mitchell's involvement and answered his own question with a put-down of Liddy, who had organized the break-in:

> He didn't know it was going to be handled though, with Dahlberg and the Texans and so forth? Well who was the asshole that did? (Unintelligible) Is it Liddy? Is it that fellow? He must be a little nuts. . . I mean he just isn't well screwed on is he? Isn't that the problem? (p. 6)

Later on, when Hunt was seeking blackmail money, Nixon referred to Hunt and the other "jackasses that are in jail" in the same negative light (Transcript, 12A, p. 78).

Self-censorship. Evidence for self-censorship exists in the post-Watergate accounts of several participants, generally in Haldeman's and Nixon's accounts, and specifically in Dean's reports.

Haldeman (1978) viewed his role with Nixon as one of keeping Nixon's dark side down and his light side up, but confesses to never discussing the issue directly with Nixon:

> I'm sorry now that I didn't discuss it with him because I think that we might have made some real progress by getting the matter on the table before us rather than operating on unspoken assumptions. . . I tried to win the battle between the two by aiding the good guy instead of also fighting the bad guy. If I had it do do over, I would do so differently. I would take the bad guy in Nixon on frontally, at least some of the time. (pp. 62-63)

Nixon (1978) reports that his own instincts about the prospect of impeachment were more pessimistic than those of most of his advisors; yet those instincts remained unvoiced (p. 632). In fact, Nixon seemed to function as a

key figure in reassuring the others about their risks of being found guilty; he dispelled their concerns openly and usually without evidence to back his optimism. If Nixon held such doubts, he systematically avoided voicing them in explicit terms.

Individuals failed to share "secrets" which contained relevant information. Dean (1976) reports that, "As much as I wanted to tell Ehrlichman everything I knew, I did not tell him about my conversation with Strachan or Liddy's remarks about Strachan. The implications were so gruesome that I believed he should hear those facts from Haldeman or the President" (p. 95).

Dean describes the self-doubts he experienced, as early as September 15, 1972, but which he refused to voice to others:

> As would be the pattern, I felt at my toughest and most hopeful after receiving a boost from Haldeman or the President himself. Away from them, however, disturbing events cropped up that fed my doubts about the ultimate success of the cover-up. Almost always they concerned the payment of money to the Watergate defendants. (p. 136)

Later, Dean reports investigating the possible crime of obstruction of justice by reviewing law books behind closed doors, rather than via discussion with the other lawyer-participants (p. 166). In fact, as a rule, Dean, consciously chose to never volunteer sensitive information to the President, let alone incriminating doubts (p. 184).

When, finally, in March, 1973, Dean began to openly pursue the implications of the coverup with the others, he describes the subsequent conversations as cautious:

> The communication reached new heights of internal stonewalling. I was astonished. It was dominated by nervous pleasantries and indirect ribbing, but with no confrontation, not even an

> acknowledgement that a cover-up, a Presidency and criminal prosecutions might be hanging in the balance. It was as if four men were discussing adultery: each knew the others were cheating, each was reluctant to admit it first. In the afternoon, we four met with the President and there were more jokes and further evasions. (p. 210)

Illusion of unanimity. Obviously, if several, of the group members remained silent about their doubts, any sense of unanimity that existed in the group was an illusion. One pattern of communication that created such an illusion was the readiness of group members to agree with each other.

The pattern was already present in the June 23, 1972 discussion between Haldeman and the President when Nixon repeatedly agreed with Haldeman's analysis (even though it contained many potential warnings which they quickly dispelled): "That's right;" "Right;" "Uh huh;" "Yeah;" "Yeah;" "All right;" "All right;" etc. (Transcript, 1A).

In September, 1972, when the group discussed press coverage of Watergate, Haldeman put forth the idea that, to the average American, Hunt and Liddy, who were obviously guilty, were "big fishes," and might take the edge off the search for more guilty parties. Note the ready and repeated agreement:

> "That was the thing Mitchell kept saying, that to those in the country Liddy and, and, uh, Hunt are big men"
>
> That's right," I agreed.
>
> "Yeah. They're White House aides," said the President.
>
> "That's right," I agreed again. (Dean, 1976, p. 131)

Again, in the same discussion, when Nixon railed on about seeking revenge. Dean repeatedly played into Nixon's assertions and remarked, "That's right," "That's right," and finally "That's an exciting prospect" (Dean, 1976, pp. 134-135).

The pattern of ready and repeated agreement pervades the White House transcripts.

Direct pressure on dissenters. According to Janis (1982), "a member of a cohesive group will rarely be subjected to direct group pressures from the majority because he or she will rarely take a position that threatens the unity of the group" (p. 247). The high level and readiness of agreement in the Watergate coverup group supports Janis' contention.

Dean (1976) reports being pressured to write the "Dean report." Dean resisted: "If they wanted to lie, fine. I was willing to help them fuzz, ignore and stonewall, without offering my own versions of the lies" (p. 164). Haldeman insisted on a report that explicitly stated that the White House was not involved in Watergate: "I was being manuevered. . . I was being pushed toward something awful, I didn't want to do it" (p. 165). Dean argued that such a report would invite prolonged investigation into a coverup and would result in indictments of Magruder, Mitchell, Ehrlichman, Haldeman, and Dean. Haldeman argued, "What do you mean? I can understand Mitchell and Magruder for the break-in, but I don't see the others" (p. 165).

When Dean confronted the President about his doubts, direct pressure was applied, including a large dose of guilt: "I am not confident that, uh, we can ride through this, I think there are, I think there are soft spots;" Nixon replied "You used to feel comfortable" (Transcript, 12A, p. 52). The discussion continues with the President listening to Dean's doubts. Finally the President provides the answer once more -- the Dean report. The answer functions to pressure Dean not to doubt the confidence of the group; writing such a report would put Dean in an even more vulnerable position. Later in the same meeting, Dean talks about who could go to jail: "I think I could for one"; Nixon replies "Oh, hell no. I can't see how you can" (p. 55).

Still later in the same meeting, Dean's dissents were again being met with

pressure. In discussing Sirica's likely sentencing, Haldeman raised the possibility of appealing an unjust sentence. Dean dissented, "There is no appellate review of sentences" (p. 81). His dissent was immediately jumped on and disputed by both Haldeman and Nixon; Haldeman: "There isn't?" President: "The judge can review it, yeah" (p. 81). Dean's concerns continue when Haldeman discusses the coverup money: "We are already deeply enough in that. That's the problem, Bob." The President responds to undermine the dissent: "I thought you said you could handle the money" (p. 82)?

When Ehrlichman also expressed doubts over the viability of an immunity plan, Haldeman and Dean quickly dispelled his doubts by substituting alternative plans which were just as problematic (i.e., the formation fo a special Presidential investigative panel) (Transcript, 13A, pp. 1-2).

In sum, most of the dissent appear to come from Dean, although at times others dissent. In most cases, other members of the group quickly pressure against the dissent by direct argument, by quickly substituting other risky alternatives without fully discussing the limitations of those, and sometimes by subtle indirect threats and the inducement of guilt.

Self-appointed mindguards. In the Watergate coverup group, the most likely candidate for a self-appointed mindguard is H. R. Haldeman. As chief of staff, Haldeman functioned as a gatekeeper who had strict control over access to the President. As a result, Haldeman could prevent alternative views from reaching the Oval Office simply by controlling the President's calendar. That Haldeman was in a position to readily function as a mindguard is evident in Mollenhoff's (1974; 1977) complaints that as ombudsman he was unable to see the President.

Haldeman (1978) writes: "I was the focal point for the whole range of problems that concerned the staff and the President. I knew at all times what the President was doing, what his current priorities were, what he was

expecting others to accomplish. I had no independent schedule of my own. . . I was rarely more than a few feet away from him during the working day. . . I received all paperwork before it went to the President and most of what came from him for action" (pp. 51-52).

Dean's (1976) account of Haldeman's insistence on the Dean report is evidence of Haldeman as a mindguard. Rather than permitting open discussion of whether or not to write a report, Haldeman pressured Dean to get on with it. In a meeting with Haldeman in Dean's office, Dean resisted, "Well, Bob, I'm not sure we can do much more." Haldeman argued, "I'm not sure about that. I think you ought to go back and try. What we need is just some sort of report that'll put this whole thing to rest and say, 'The White House wasn't really involved.' That's what the President has in mind" (p. 165). In pressuring Dean, Haldeman functioned in a dual protective role: he protected Nixon from Dean's doubts and Nixon from having to directly order Dean to fabricate a report.

Some Concluding Thoughts

The present case study serves as a preliminary step to understanding the Watergate coverup as a case of groupthink. Evidence of both the conditions likely to exist as antecedents to groupthink, and the groupthink symptoms, exist in ample quantity in participants' reports, as well as in the White House transcripts, to make a rather compelling case. However, more compelling, and of greater heuristic as well as pragmatic value, would be further in-depth and systematic interaction analysis of the transcripts. Coding schemes to assess groupthink symptoms could be developed and applied to those transcripts to test the case more rigorously. Watergate offers the rare opportunity to study the words, sequences of interaction, the very discussion processes by which a national policy fiasco occurred. More careful investigation can and should be conducted before making a final assessment about the coverup as groupthink. That kind of investigation could provide an understanding of the groupthink

process at a micro-level (messages and sequences of messages) that might well yield systematic and readily applicable steps for identifying and/or avoiding the groupthink phenomenon.

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